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JOHN JENKINS: FANTASIA-SUITES

JOHN CUNNINGHAM

John Jenkins: Fantasia-Suites III, ed. Andrew Ashbee, MB CIV (London: Stainer and Bell, 2019). xxxvii+186pp. ISBN: 9780852499566 ISMN: 9790220225451. £105

The latest Musica Britannica volume (MB 104) is the sixth in that august series wholly dedicated to John Jenkins's consort music (which also features heavily in a seventh):¹ only John Blow has as many single volumes.² It is no accident that Jenkins's music features so prominently. The editor of the present volume (and four of the previous MB ones), Andrew Ashbee has been championing his music for over half a century, as readers of this journal will be aware. Indeed MB 104 is the final instalment in the series of fantasia-suite volumes (with MB 78, 2001; and MB 90, 2010), which mean that all of the almost 80 fantasia-suites by Jenkins are now available.

Jenkins and his contemporaries did not use the term 'fantasia-suite', which was a term coined by Thurston Dart to describe suites comprising a fantasia followed by one or two dances. A parallel but independent development to the trio sonata, the fantasia-suite was invented by John Coprario in the early 1620s in the household of the then Prince Charles for an ensemble known as 'Coprario's Musique'. In a clear reference to the repertoire, in the 1664 edition of the *Brief Introduction to the Skill of Musick* Playford recalled Charles's affection for 'those incomparable Fantazies for one Violin and Basse Viol to the Organ, Composed by Mr. Coperario'. He wrote 24 of these suites following the fantasia-alman-galliard pattern, scored for one or two violins, bass viol and organ (MB 46). Arguably the best-known examples of the genre were written by Coprario's mentee William Lawes, who composed 16 suites in the same scoring (eight for one violin; eight for two) and structure (MB 60). They too formed part of the repertoire of chamber music heard in the inner rooms of Whitehall, during the reign of Charles I. Lawes took the Coprario model to new heights and are among his best works. Jenkins too saw the potential in this nascent genre and became its most prolific exponent. As noted, he wrote almost 80 fantasia-suites, over about four decades. Christopher Field first sub-categorising them in 'Groups', of which he identified eight.³ (As a side note, the companion volume to Ashbee's *The Harmonious Musick of John Jenkins* (1992) has now been published – dedicated to the suites, airs and vocal music, it will be essential reading and offers a detailed

¹ *Restoration Music for Three Violins, Bass Viol and Continuo*, ed. Peter Holman and John Cunningham, MB 104 (2018). Volumes wholly comprising music by Jenkins: MB 26 (1969; rev. 1975, ed. Ashbee); MB 39 (1977), ed. Donald Peart; MB 70 (1997), ed. Ashbee; MB 78 (2001), ed. Ashbee; MB 90 (2010), ed. Ashbee; MB 104 (2020), ed. Ashbee.

² Matthew Locke has five volumes, with a sixth in preparation; by contrast William Lawes has only two in the series.

³ All but one of the Groups are now available in the MB series: Group I = MB 104; Group II = MB 78; Group III = MB 90; Group IV = MB 104; Group V = MB 26; Group VI = Fretwork (1993); Group VII = MB 78; Group VIII = MB 104.

examination of all eight Groups.) While not as well-known as the fantasia-suites of Lawes, some of Jenkins's suites are not only fine examples of the genre but represent some of the best chamber compositions of the period. Lamentably, relatively few are available in modern recordings. MB 104 presents Groups I and IV: both are scored for treble, bass and organ. The former are among Jenkins's earliest explorations of the genre and should be considered alongside the Group II suites (MB 78).

Ashbee's introduction offers a fascinating and authoritative account of the Jenkins suites and their immediate contexts; he also helpfully situates them within the genre, elucidating important stylistic connections and influences with the fantasia-suites of Coprario and Lawes. As with much of Jenkins's music it is difficult to pinpoint an exact chronology for the fantasia-suites. The earliest copies of Groups I and II date from the 1650s and 60s; however, Ashbee concludes that they were written in the 1630s and early 1640s for performance in the households of the Derham (Norfolk) and L'Estrange families in which Jenkins served (though the exact dates are unclear); he did not receive a court appointment until the Restoration. Jenkins no doubt had access to courtly circles and, as Ashbee notes, must have met Lawes by early 1634 during preparations for *The Triumph of Peace* masque in which they both performed (and for which Lawes wrote music): Jenkins's elegy published in 1648 suggests a mutual respect and friendship. Jenkins had access to courtly repertoire and certainly knew the fantasia-suites of Coprario, which are found among the manuscripts associated with the Derham and L'Estrange families – it is tempting to imagine those of Lawes being performed there too, but there is no evidence. The Jenkins Groups I and II suites do not appear to have been disseminated as widely as those of Coprario or Lawes, again likely a symptom of their close court connections.

Outwardly the Jenkins 17 Group I suites – which occupy the majority of MB 104 – follow the structural principles established by Coprario, and used by Lawes. Each is in the three-movement form: fantasia, almain, ayre (i.e. galliard). Writing with court musicians in mind, Coprario and Lawes could rely on court violinists, and specified the scorings as for one or two violins, bass viol and organ (indeed Coprario's suites are ground-breaking in specifying violins). Jenkins was more at the mercy of available resources, labelling the top part only as 'treble' and composing in a style that would suit either viol or violin. There are often parallels in Jenkins's contrapuntal approach with the easy sophistication of his viol consorts in the fantasias, which tend to build from a quasi-fugal opening; he avoids the more angular part-writing of Coprario or Lawes. While not as harmonically adventurous as the suites of Lawes, Jenkins impressively traverses eleven keys on each of the seven tonics, preserved in the main source (Bodleian Library, MS Mus. Sch. C.81) in ascending order F-F-g-G-a-a-A-Bb-Bb-C-c-d-d-D-D-e-e. By comparison Lawes employed a more systematic tonal approach wrote two sets of eight suites, on four tonics: g-G-a-C-d-D-d-D. Ashbee suggests that Jenkins's patron Sir Nicholas L'Estrange, may have been influential in this rigorous tonal exploration: in his 'fastidious attention to organisation and accuracy' L'Estrange might have 'encouraged Jenkins to supply a range of pieces embracing all seven tonics, composing new works to fill any gaps' (xxvii). Given that Lawes and Jenkins were writing their fantasia-suites around the same time and both in reference to Coprario one naturally comes up against questions of

cross-influence. Coprario clearly exerted an influence on both of the younger composers but direct links between Lawes and Jenkins's early fantasia-suites are not obvious: indeed comparison tends to reveal more internal differences than similarities.

With the exception of nos. 12 and 15, the Group I suites lack virtuosic division-writing that became so important in many of Jenkins's fantasia-suites from Group III onwards. We see this contrast explicitly in the two Group IV suites with which MB 104 concludes. These two suites appear to have been composed about a decade or so after Jenkins's first experiments in the genre, and are more similar to the Group III suites (MB 90) and to the Group VI fantasia-airs, both of which are notable for the virtuosity of the divisions. While the Group I and II suites conclude with galliards, the Group IV suites end with the more modern corant. As Ashbee points out, such pieces are comparatively rare in the English repertoire. We see perhaps the seeds of the virtuosic style in Group I, nos. 12 and 15, which I have suggested elsewhere may also show the influence of Lawes's suite in D major (VdGS 135). Lawes's fantasia is rather different to the rest of his fantasia-suites, and Ashbee suggests that perhaps it was 'copied or reworked after the rest of the set' (xxvii) and so may have been reworked in light of Lawes's encounter with Jenkins's virtuosic writing. This is certainly possible, though any reworking is difficult to date: I have elsewhere suggested that VdGS 135 was reworked c.1638, slightly earlier than the Group II or IV pieces appear to have been composed.⁴ The main conclusion to draw, may simply be that these pieces are evidence of an emerging new approach in the late 1630s and early 1640s were beginning to explore this newly virtuosic style in the fantasia building on the shared principles of the art of division. Ashbee is right to highlight the quality of these two suites, and to lament the fact that there are only two: in them Jenkins offers a lesson in the assimilation of virtuosity. They must be considered highpoints in the division repertoire.

As one expects from a MB volume, this collection of suites is impressively presented to Stainer and Bell's usual high standards. The standard of editing too is excellent: the principles are clear and sensible; the commentary unfussy, uncluttered and easy to navigate. The organ part only survives complete for the first fantasia of the Group IV suites; the rest have been expertly reconstructed (the partly figured bass part does survive for several of the movements). Given the high quality of the music one hopes that its being made readily available will encourage performances and recordings. The price may put off some readers but presumably Stainer and Bell will shortly issue performing parts – at which point there is really no excuse!

⁴ See John Cunningham, *The Consort Music of William Lawes, 1602–45* (2010), 184–200.